

DURANGO INTERAGENCY FIRE DISPATCH

U.S. Forest Service ♦ Bureau of Land Management ♦ National Park Service
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PUBLIC LANDS ZONED FOR FIRE RESTRICTIONS

Fire managers will be trying something new this year when they implement fire restrictions on public lands. The San Juan Public Lands, which include the San Juan National Forest and the Bureau of Land Management-San Juan Center, have been divided into two zones - lower- and higher-elevation zones.

"It is extremely difficult to apply fire restrictions that fit conditions on lands that range from 4,500 ft. to over 14,000 ft. in elevation," said Mark Lauer, Fire Management Officer for the San Juan Public Lands. "Not only do the higher elevations often receive more moisture than the lower elevations, but the vegetation also affects how likely the area is to burn if a fire does start," he said.

Spruce-fir forests found at higher elevations have historically burned on a frequency of every 300-500 years while ponderosa pine forests found at the low-to-mid elevations have seen fires on an average of every 6-30 years.

"And the ponderosa pine forests are where many residents have chosen to put their homes in the last 50 years," Lauer said "so we must be more diligent about preventing human-caused fires in these areas."

The new zones are not based strictly on elevation or vegetation type because it was necessary to find some definable features to describe the boundary between zones. From Highway 550 east to Wolf Creek Pass, the low zone includes all San Juan Public Lands outside of the South San Juan and Weminuche Wildernesses. West of Highway 550 over to the Utah border, fire managers have used roads and trails to define the low zone, which includes lands south of Kennebec Pass, Spruce Mill Road, and the West Dolores Road.

Basically, all BLM-San Juan Center lands, including Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, are in the low zone, except for those located in San Juan and Ouray counties outside of Silverton.

"People may have to use a part of the forest that they are not familiar with if they want to have a campfire outside of a campground," said Lauer, "but at least they will have that opportunity with the designation of these zones."

Fire managers have four measured indices regarding fire danger that they look at, as well as some subjective factors, when deciding whether to institute fire restrictions.

"Recent rainstorms have helped the fire danger situation, but the larger trees have just barely begun to recover from four years of drought, so the measured indices are in ranges that shout 'caution,'" said Ron Klatt, Fire Management Officer for the Columbine Public Lands Office in Bayfield. "And now the grasses, which greened up so nicely this spring, have begun to cure out, increasing the chances of a human-caused fire escaping."

Fire managers look at the long-range outlook not only for weather, but also the availability of firefighting resources. "Right now we are still in good shape in southwest Colorado, but some resources like Airtanker 22, which resides in Durango, have been sent to fires in Arizona and New Mexico as the fire activity increases there," said Lauer.

There are three stages of fire restrictions available to federal fire managers - Stages 1, 2, and 3, with Stage 1 being the least restrictive and Stage 3 the most restrictive.

On Friday, June 27, Zone 1 or the lower-elevation zone, will be placed into Stage 1 fire restrictions. These restrictions mean that:

- campfires are limited to permanent fire rings or grates within developed campgrounds;
- smoking is limited to vehicles, buildings, or 3-ft. wide areas cleared of vegetation;
- chainsaws and other internal-combustion engines must have approved, working spark arresters;
- acetylene and other torches with an open flame may not be used; and,
- the use of explosives is prohibited.

By restricting campfires to campgrounds, fire managers hope to reduce the risk of an escaped fire from an untended or unextinguished campfire.

The use of fireworks is prohibited on all Forest Service and BLM lands, regardless of zone.

There are currently no plans for restrictions in the high zone, but if the monsoon season doesn't arrive in mid-to-late July, restrictions could be possible. "However, it's unlikely in the high zone that we would need to go beyond Stage 1 restrictions," said Lauer.

Flyers describing the current restrictions will be posted across the public lands at trailheads, campgrounds, and entry areas. Maps showing the two zones will be available at Public Lands Offices in Pagosa, Bayfield, Durango, and Dolores, as well as at Visitor Centers and on the Web by the end of the week.

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